

VFW -- 106 YEARS

GREETINGS

THE YEAR WAS 1899. AND THE VETERANS OF THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR WERE SUFFERING FROM DISEASES, INJURIES AND NEGLECT. THROUGHOUT AMERICA, VETERANS SAW THE NEED TO JOIN TOGETHER, ORGANIZE AND HAVE AN ORGANIZATION THAT REPRESENTED THEIR INTERESTS AND PROVIDED FOR THEIR NEEDS.

EARLIER THAT YEAR A GROUP OF VETERANS IN OHIO HAD FORMED AN ORGANIZATION UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF JAMES C. PUTNAM. FOUNDED ON SEPTEMBER 29, 1899 AND CHARTERED BY THE STATE OF OHIO ON OCTOBER 10. THAT GROUP WAS CALLED THE AMERICAN VETERANS OF FOREIGN SERVICE.

IN JULY OF 1901, SOME VETERANS IN ALTOONA, PENNSYLVANIA FOUNDED ANOTHER VETERANS GROUP AND CALLED THEMSELVES THE PHILIPPINE WAR VETERANS.

IN OCTOBER OF 1901 ANOTHER VETERANS GROUP WAS FORMED IN PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA, AND IN JULY OF 1902 ANOTHER GROUP WAS FORMED IN PHILADELPHIA.

THE IDEA THAT JOINING TOGETHER BROUGHT STRENGTH WAS QUICKLY SPREADING THROUGH THE RANKS OF AMERICA'S VETERANS -- AN IDEA THAT IS STILL CURRENT TODAY -- STRENGTH IN UNITY.

THE YEAR 1905 SAW THE OHIO ORGANIZATION AND THOSE IN PENNSYLVANIA JOIN FORCES, AND EIGHT YEARS LATER IN 1913, THAT NEW GROUP JOINED FORCES WITH THE ONE IN DENVER, COLORADO. THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES THEN BECAME A NATIONWIDE ORGANIZATION SERVING AMERICA'S VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES.

BY THE TIME THE FIRST GUNS OF WORLD WAR ONE FIRED IN AUGUST OF 1914 THE VFW WAS AN ESTABLISHED AND RECOGNIZED VETERANS ORGANIZATION.

WHILE THAT WAR GROUND ON IN THE FIELDS AND TRENCHES OF EUROPE AND SOME TWO MILLION AMERICAN MEN AND WOMEN WERE SENT "OVER THERE", THE VFW WAS FIGHTING IN THE HALLS OF CONGRESS FOR THE BENEFITS THAT WOULD HELP THESE SERVICE PEOPLE WHEN THEY CAME HOME.

WE FOUGHT FOR WAR RISK INSURANCE AND FOR MEDICAL CARE AND FOR TRAINING FOR THE DISABLED VETERANS.

IN THE PEACE THAT FOLLOWED THAT WAR, PEOPLE IGNORED THE MILITARY AND THE VETERANS WHO HAD BROUGHT THEM THAT PEACE. IN THE DEPRESSION THAT SOON SPREAD ACROSS THE NATION, THE GOVERNMENT UNDERFUNDED ITS MILITARY AND ARGUED AGAINST AWARDED ITS VETERANS THE BONUS THEY DESERVED.

THE VFW FOUGHT ON. IT'S RANKS SWELLING AND ITS INFLUENCE SPREADING THROUGHOUT CONGRESS.

ONE HISTORIAN WROTE THAT DURING THE ERA JUST AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR, THE VFW SET THE GOALS THAT WOULD EVENTUALLY BE THE BASIS OF ALL VETERANS LEGISLATION.

DURING THE 1930'S OUR ORGANIZATION WARNED OF IMPENDING WAR AND ASKED THE GOVERNMENT TO REBUILD OUR ARMED FORCES. BUT AMERICA WAS NOT INTERESTED IN A STRONG MILITARY IN THAT DECADE. CITIZENS AND POLITICIANS ALIKE BELIEVED THAT IF WE JUST PROMOTED NEUTRALITY, WE WOULD BE SAFE. WHILE OTHER COUNTRIES PREPARED FOR WAR. AMERICA LET HER ARMED FORCES FALL TO THE POINT WHERE THEY DID NOT EVEN HAVE ENOUGH AMMUNITION.

BUT THERE WERE SOME BRIGHT MOMENTS IN THAT DECADE AND ONE OF THE BRIGHTEST WAS IN MARCH OF 1931 WHEN PRESIDENT HERBERT HOOVER SIGNED THE LEGISLATION MAKING THE STAR SPANGLED BANNER OUR NATIONAL ANTHEM. THE VFW HAD LONG SUPPORTED THAT ACTION AND THROUGH ITS POSTS HAD RAISED PETITIONS WITH OVER FOUR MILLION NAMES ASKING CONGRESS TO APPROVE THE LEGISLATION.

IT WAS ALSO THE DECADE THAT SAW US WIN THE BATTLE FOR THE WORLD WAR ONE VETERANS BONUS. IT HAD TAKEN 14 YEARS BUT IN JUNE OF 1936 THE BONUS WAS FINALLY PAID.

1936 WAS ALSO THE YEAR THAT WE RECEIVED OUR CONGRESSIONAL CHARTER. A DOCUMENT ESTABLISHING US AS AN ORGANIZATION RECOGNIZED BY THE CONGRESS TO REPRESENT VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES.

AT OUR CONVENTION IN AUGUST OF 1941, WE AGAIN CALLED FOR A STRONG DEFENSE AND A FIRM FOREIGN POLICY. OF 139 RESOLUTIONS ADOPTED AT THAT CONVENTION, 18 DEALT WITH DEFENSE. IN THOSE 18 RESOLUTIONS WERE THE IDEAS THAT WOULD EVENTUALLY GUIDE OUR GOVERNMENT IN THE MOBILIZATION THAT WOULD FOLLOW THE ATTACK ON PEARL HARBOR -- DECEMBER 7, 1941.

WERE WE AHEAD OF THE TIMES? NO, WE WERE JUST AWARE OF THE TIMES. THE SAME WAY WE ARE TODAY. AT OUR MOST RECENT CONVENTION, WE AGAIN CALLED FOR A STRONG DEFENSE AND A

FIRM FOREIGN POLICY. NO ONE ATTACKS YOU WHEN YOU ARE STRONG. THE POWER THAT ALLOWS YOU TO FIGHT A WAR ALSO ALLOWS YOU TO PROTECT THE PEACE. YET, DAY AFTER DAY WE HEAR VOICES IN THIS COUNTRY CALLING FOR A REDUCTION IN MILITARY STRENGTH. THE LESSON WAS LEARNED IN DECEMBER OF 1941, BUT SOME DO NOT READ HISTORY OR DO NOT UNDERSTAND THE MESSAGE IT CARRIES.

OUR WORK FOR AMERICA'S VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES INCREASED AS WORLD WAR TWO RAGED ON. AND AFTERWARDS WHEN WAR BROKE OUT IN KOREA, THE VFW AGAIN WENT TO CONGRESS AND CAMPAIGNED FOR INCREASED AND IMPROVED VETERANS BENEFITS.

THE COLD WAR YEARS AFTER KOREA AND THE HOT WAR YEARS OF THE VIETNAM WAR BROUGHT NEW CHALLENGES.

IT'S THAT INDIVIDUAL DEDICATION AND EFFORT THAT MEANS SO MUCH TO US. IN THIS ORGANIZATION, EVERY MEMBER COUNTS.

THIS YEAR WE ARE CELEBRATING 106 YEARS OF SERVICE. THAT'S
QUITE A RECORD.

THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THIS ORGANIZATION SINCE THAT
DAY 106 YEARS AGO HAVE BEEN DUE TO OUR MEMBERSHIP.
MEMBERSHIP GIVES US STRENGTH, POWER AND INFLUENCE. WHEN
OUR LEGISLATIVE TEAM TESTIFIES BEFORE CONGRESS, THOSE
SENATORS AND REPRESENTATIVES LISTEN -- BECAUSE THEY KNOW
THAT THERE ARE TWO MILLION OF US OUT HERE LISTENING TO
WHAT THEY SAY AND HOW THEY VOTE.

THROUGH THE YEARS WE HAVE DEVELOPED SOME VERY
IMPORTANT PROGRAMS TO BENEFIT MEMBERS AND NON-MEMBERS
ALIKE. EACH WAS DESIGNED TO ANSWER THE NEEDS OF AMERICA'S
VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES.

WE HAVE OUR NATIONAL VETERANS SERVICE, THE HEART AND
SOUL OF OUR ORGANIZATION. THROUGH OUR NETWORK OF
SERVICE OFFICERS WE HELP VETERANS AND THEIR DEPENDENTS
RECEIVE THE ENTITLEMENTS DUE THEM. A REPORT FROM A

CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEE THAT SPENT 18 MONTHS STUDYING THE VETERANS AFFAIRS SAID: "IN SOME CASES BENEFITS AND SERVICES HAVE BECOME SO OUTDATED AND PROGRAM MANAGEMENT SO INEFFECTIVE, THAT THEY BREAK FAITH WITH THOSE WHO SERVED."

THAT, MY FRIENDS, IS A MAJOR STEP FORWARD FOR ALL OF US. NOW WE HAVE A CONGRESSIONAL COMMITTEE AGREEING WITH WHAT WE HAVE BEEN SAYING FOR MANY, MANY YEARS. NOW WE CAN TAKE IT AND RUN WITH IT AND MAKE A LOT OF PROGRESS FOR AMERICA'S VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES.

NATIONAL SECURITY AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS TAKES THE VOICE OF THE VETERANS TO THE PENTAGON AND THE STATE DEPARTMENT. FOR MANY YEARS NOW, THE VFW HAS LED THE WAY IN THE RECOVERY OF THOSE LISTED AS MIA. OUR ANNUAL TRIPS TO SOUTHEAST ASIA ARE PART OF THE PROCESS; A FULL-ACCOUNTING OF ALL AMERICANS MISSING FROM THE VIETNAM WAR. PERIOD. WE WILL ACCEPT NOTHING LESS. PERIOD.

OUR NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE PROGRAM REPRESENTS VETERANS IN THE HALLS OF CONGRESS AND GETS OUR NEEDS WRITTEN INTO THE LAW. FORTUNE MAGAZINE HAS LISTED THE VFW IN THE TOP 25 POWER ORGANIZATIONS IN WASHINGTON, D.C. THEY CALL THAT GROUP THE POWER 25 BECAUSE THEY KNOW HOW TO GET THINGS DONE FOR THEIR MEMBERS. AND WHEN THE VFW GETS THINGS DONE FOR ITS MEMBERS, WE REALLY GET THINGS DONE FOR ALL OF AMERICA'S 26 MILLION VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES.

IN MARCH, AT OUR MID-WINTER CONFERENCE WE WELCOME 54 OF OUR COUNTRY'S BEST STUDENTS, THE FINALISTS IN THE VFW VOICE OF DEMOCRACY PROGRAM. THIS PROGRAM IS A VERY IMPORTANT PART OF VETERANS AFFAIRS. NO ONE HAS A GREATER INTEREST IN THIS COUNTRY THAN SOMEONE WHO HAS DEFENDED IT ON FOREIGN BATTLEFIELDS AND SEEN GOOD FRIENDS DIE FOR IT. WHAT WE SEE IN THIS PROGRAM IS A CONTINUATION OF THE BATTLE FOR FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY.

OUR CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION PROGRAM BRINGS THE MESSAGE OF WHAT AMERICA IS AND WHAT AMERICA STANDS FOR TO MILLIONS OF PEOPLE EACH YEAR. COMMUNITY SERVICE IS THE

PROGRAM WHERE WE EXCEL AS VETERAN VOLUNTEERS. MAKING OUR COMMUNITIES AND IN TURN OUR COUNTRY A BETTER PLACE TO LIVE IS WHAT COMMUNITY SERVICE IS ALL ABOUT. PART OF THAT VOLUNTEERING SPIRIT CAN BE SEEN IN THE MANY PROGRAMS WE SPONSOR FOR THE YOUTH IN THE COMMUNITY.

OUR BUDDY POPPY PROGRAM HONORS THOSE WHO GAVE SO MUCH SO THAT WE CAN HAVE SO MUCH TO ENJOY.

AND THEN THERE IS THAT ONE PROGRAM THAT EACH OF US TAKES PART IN ALL THE TIME -- MEMBERSHIP. WE PARTICIPATE BY JOINING THE VFW, BY REMAINING IN THE VFW AND BY ASKING OTHERS TO JOIN. THE MOST IMPORTANT THING A VETERAN CAN DO IS TO JOIN A VETERANS ORGANIZATION AND GET ACTIVE.

THOSE WHO FOUNDED THIS ORGANIZATION WERE REJECTED, RIDICULED, NEGLECTED AND FORGOTTEN BY THE NATION THAT SENT THEM TO WAR. BUT THEY DID NOT GIVE UP. THEY BANDED TOGETHER AND SET THE COURSE FOR THE ORGANIZATION WE ARE TODAY. THEY TOOK THEIR DREAMS AND MADE THEM REALITIES.

NOW WE FACE THE FUTURE, AND IT IS OUR CHALLENGE TODAY TO COME UP WITH A VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF OUR ORGANIZATION AND TO BE AS SUCCESSFUL IN OUR TIME AS OUR FOUNDERS WERE 106 YEARS AGO.

WE HAVE 106 YEARS OF ACHIEVEMENT TO LOOK BACK UPON. ONE HUNDRED AND SIX YEARS OF LEADING THE WAY IN VETERANS AFFAIRS. ONE HUNDRED AND SIX YEARS OF SERVING AMERICA'S VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES. NOW WE HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE THE NEXT 106 YEARS OUR LEGACY, OUR GIFT TO FUTURE GENERATIONS OF VETERANS. WE WILL GIVE THEM OUR BEST.